

The K-Pop King

Chairman Bang, the man behind BTS, is bringing his formula for creating K-pop idols to America.

By [Alex Barasch](#)

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Bang with Katseye, a new girl band whose members come from across the globe. Photograph by Charlotte Rutherford for The New Yorker

Scooter Braun was in a tailspin. It was February, 2021, and the music manager, who had made his name launching the careers of Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande, was nearing forty and facing a brutal divorce. An equally nasty battle with Taylor Swift, over his ownership of her song catalogue, had sullied his public image. Rumors circulated that the future of Braun’s company, Ithaca Holdings, was in doubt. Amid this tumult, he was surprised to receive an invitation to speak with someone who had long fascinated him: the South Korean producer Bang Si-hyuk—known to admirers as Hitman Bang.

Braun had first heard of Bang several years earlier, when a member of his social-media team told him about a boy band from South Korea whose online-engagement numbers had surpassed even Bieber’s. Braun was skeptical and asked her to check the figures again in a week. They’d gone up. The group, BTS, became the biggest act in the world—and the one with the most zealous fan community, which routinely

mobilizes online to insure that their boys top the charts. Bang had handpicked the group's members and co-written many of its early hits.

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Braun and Bang met on Zoom, and bonded over the fact that both had plucked young artists from obscurity and guided their meteoric ascents. “It was like finding a kindred spirit across the sea,” Braun told me. “I’ve never been able to talk to anyone about this stuff.” Soon, they were chatting three times a week. A month later, Braun sold his company to Bang’s hybe Corporation, in a deal worth upward of a billion dollars.

hybe, founded in 2005, is part record label, part talent agency, part tech platform, part entertainment conglomerate. Bang is determined to extend the company’s influence across the international pop landscape. To this end, he named Braun a C.E.O. of hybe America—and announced a ten-year partnership with Universal Music Group, whose head, Sir Lucian Grainge, praised hybe’s “groundbreaking” model for “engaging the superfan.” John Janick, the C.E.O. of the Universal division Interscope Geffen A&M, joined forces with Bang to create Katseye, a multiracial, English-language girl group modelled on the K-pop framework. The goal was to confect a juggernaut—or, failing that, at least to score a few hits.

Janick told me, “Bang wants to have No. 1s around the world, and the biggest artists globally. But the fans are the key.” Other labels had chased fleeting TikTok sensations for short-term gain; the K-pop model, by contrast, is a long-term strategy that invests in years of training and development for each act. “Bang has helped the business continue to evolve,” Janick said.

Braun, once the Svengali of America’s biggest pop stars, now has a Svengali of his own. He told me, “The thing that made me believe that Spotify was going to work was Daniel Ek”—the service’s co-founder. “The thing that makes me believe hybe is going to work is Bang.”

Hybe’s Seoul headquarters is a nineteen-story tower swarming with activity: each day, hundreds of pilgrims show up, hoping for a glimpse of their idols. The building has several recording and rehearsal studios, and security is high. On floors where artists work and train, protective measures have included biometric scans.

By comparison, hybe’s L.A. outpost is deceptively modest: three floors in a building in Santa Monica. When I visited, this past spring, the office was almost empty. Bang was waiting for me in a spartan conference room, holding an acoustic guitar. He didn’t play anything, though.

Bang is portly and good-humored. He was born in Seoul and was a solitary, bookish child until his parents, concerned about his shyness, encouraged him to take up the guitar as a hobby. “I went a little bit further than my parents intended,” he said, wryly. He memorized the *Billboard* charts, got into Led

Zeppelin and heavy metal, and formed a band, sometimes skipping classes to jam. He set music aside to secure entrance to Seoul National University, but he soon returned to the scene as a producer. Bang held off on telling his parents until he'd become successful enough to give them an envelope full of cash. "Musicians can make money, too," he said.

Three decades later, Bang is a billionaire. We spoke through a translator, whom he sometimes outpaced with references to such stars as Kendrick Lamar and Joey Bada\$\$; often, he became so animated that he switched to English. Bang got his start at JYP Entertainment, a Korean label. In 2005, he formed his own, calling it Big Hit Entertainment. (The company became hybe in 2021.) Other K-pop outfits policed their trainees' conduct, but Bang didn't set curfews or confiscate phones, allowing candidates to succeed or fail on the strength of their own talent and drive. Bang said, early on, "We tell them, 'Do whatever you want. But get out if there's no development.' "

Video From The New Yorker

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He originally wanted BTS to be a hip-hop crew. "I didn't really believe in K-pop," he told me. But he began to see that the genre had an unusually strong "fandom culture," and suspected that he could leverage it more effectively than others had. He studied groups with diehard loyalists, noting a trend toward "tightly synchronized choreography" and "close, and frequent, fan communication," he said. He also realized that hard-core supporters "get angry very easily—offended and angry. So there were things that we were *not* to do as well."

Before BTS, K-pop idols were polished and often remote. When a group launched, its members went on television to promote their album, then retreated until the next release. Bang realized that the Internet was a better way to reach young people. For BTS, he didn't bother with TV appearances. His strategy, he said, was "trying to figure out the most fandom-friendly thing to do and then taking it to the extreme." He established a YouTube channel for BTS well before its first single was released, filling it with behind-the-scenes clips. The group's seven members ran their own Twitter account—unusual for a K-pop act—and kept up a lively dialogue with their followers, live-tweeting drunken nights on the town and publicly teasing one another about staged "candid" photographs. This breezy puncturing of their own mystique was central to their appeal.

The boys also stood out for writing many of their own lyrics, occasionally in a regional dialect. When BTS debuted, in 2013, the dominant K-pop group, BigBang, promoted an image of glamorous misbehavior. BTS's members foregrounded their uncertainties about the future, airing mental-health and personal struggles. ("Reflection," a song co-written by the group's leader, RM, ends with the refrain "I wish I could love myself.") To young listeners, the group was more accessible—thematically and literally—than its K-pop predecessors. "I didn't want them to be false idols," Bang has said. "I wanted to create a BTS that could become a close friend."

This cultivation of "authenticity" has been rewarded. BTS has sold more than forty million albums in South Korea alone, contributing an estimated five billion dollars a year to the national economy. When

its eldest member, Kim Seok-jin, approached twenty-eight—then the mandatory age of enlistment—the country’s Military Service Act was amended to offer him a reprieve: as “a pop-culture artist” who’d “greatly enhanced the image of Korea,” he could defer for two years.

Katseye, the English-language girl group that Bang has developed with his American partners, reflects his international ambitions. “I feel lucky I’ve had the opportunity, since I was very young, to work in a lot of cross-cultural environments,” Bang told me. The knowledge he’d gained would help drive hybe’s worldwide expansion. He compared his process, without irony, to A.I.: “You know how machine learning happens?” he asked. He studied local music industries and fan behavior across the globe in an attempt to target listeners in various countries more precisely. “We don’t apply our methodologies uniformly in each region, but we don’t follow the practices of each region blindly, either,” he said. “We take what works.”

Before Braun joined hybe, Bang barely interacted with American music executives. “He’d come to the U.S. and then not meet with anybody,” Braun said. He traced this reluctance to a formative failure: when Bang was in his late twenties, he and a collaborator, J. Y. Park, rented a room outside L.A., where they’d been told they could become what Bang called “star producers.” In Korea, they were certified hitmakers; in the States, they couldn’t even get a meeting. Bang retreated to Seoul within months.

Braun calls Bang “a studiohead,” and Bang’s reputation is as a producer and a lyricist first, and an executive second. He’s adept at a wide variety of musical styles. Among the hits that he helped to create for BTS are “Spring Day,” an emotional anthem for lost loved ones, and “Idol,” a high-energy track that combines traditional Korean instruments with E.D.M. stylings.



“Paula, do you know where my green jacket is? I’m leaving you.”

Cartoon by Juliana Castro Varón

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Braun's role at hybe, as he saw it, was "to be the cheerleader Bang deserved," introducing Bang and his artists to potential Western collaborators. The greatest triumph of their partnership so far is the solo career of BTS's Jung Kook, who, as Bang put it, had always wanted to become "a U.S. pop superstar." After becoming C.E.O., Braun played Jung Kook a track, "Seven," which had been written for Justin Bieber. The chorus: "I'll be fucking you right, seven days a week." Jung Kook had been the baby of BTS, but Braun told him, "When Justin Timberlake did a solo record without 'NSync, he leaned in with edge." Jung Kook's album, "Golden," on which "Seven" appeared, was the first by a BTS member entirely in English. Braun enlisted such guest artists as Jack Harlow and Usher, who joined Jung Kook on a remix of "Standing Next to You"—and invited him to perform it with him at the Super Bowl. (Jung Kook's military service prevented him from accepting.) Last November, the album débuted at No. 2 on the *Billboard* 200.

In 2023, Bang bought himself a mansion in Bel Air. The house requires significant maintenance, and he told me that the contractors he's hired have confirmed his suspicions about Americans' work ethic. "Koreans, when they work on something, do it on time," he said. "We're the fastest people in the world. Here, they say they're working on something, but they're not."

Joon Choi, a top hybe executive, sometimes stays at Bang's house during business trips to L.A. He came to hybe from Pinkfong, best known in the U.S. for the kiddie sensation "Baby Shark," and had been hired to oversee Weverse, a "global superfan platform" on which artists would post exclusive content. When the pandemic hit, the app became a top priority. BTS postponed a world tour and live-streamed a show on Weverse instead. The event reportedly drew seven hundred and fifty thousand viewers, generating more than eighteen million dollars in ticket sales—and many fans bought merch mid-concert, also through Weverse.

Choi's team has since pitched the platform to artists in South Korea, Japan, Mexico, and the U.S.; the company has recruited Ariana Grande and Blackpink, a major K-pop group from a rival company. The appeal for performers is straightforward: why be subjected to haters on the wider Internet when you can be surrounded exclusively by adoring fans? "Artists who use the platform feel safer than when they're thrown into that wild, wild social-media world," Choi told me.

Bang explained the business rationale behind Weverse: he'd come to feel that music-makers like hybe were merely furnishing "raw materials" for tech companies like Spotify, which marshals its user data to recommend artist merchandise and concerts. "We had success with BTS, thanks to the fan intimacy," he said. "But we didn't know *who* our fans were, or *where* they were, because all the distribution was going through third parties."

Weverse, a savvy amalgam of Instagram, YouTube, and Ticketmaster, is a one-stop shop. Data on demographics and consumption patterns flow back to hybe and help determine everything from tour destinations to what languages to sing in. Upon downloading the app, I became one of more than ten

million monthly users—nine million of whom don’t speak Korean. After joining a group’s “community,” I could learn more about each member, read their posts, watch their streams, buy their merch, and vie for their individual attention.

The experience can be overwhelming. My phone buzzed whenever an artist I followed posted a photo or even replied to someone else’s comment; I came to know what time certain idols woke up, because of the deluge of notifications that ensued. (I also learned when they contracted covid or got injured during a rehearsal, thanks to push alerts.) The effect was the same as that of an overactive group chat, if it were populated by pop stars instead of friends. It occurred to me that, for a lonely teen-ager, Weverse might offer a substitute for the feeling of constant connection that such text threads provide. The app’s simulacrum of intimacy is unsubtle. One morning, a banner ad inviting me to try a paid feature, Weverse DM, read, “Miss you! How’s your day?” Weverse DM lets subscribers message idols directly. Choi told me that the feature would “accelerate the process of becoming *more* of a fan”—and encourage heavier spending on the app—but not necessarily bring in new ones. He’d been ambivalent about the idea, and Bang initially opposed it, but executives who supported it prevailed.

Choi approaches American labels with a disclaimer: “Weverse is not for everyone on your roster.” The unspoken reality is that hungry young artists willing to make themselves available to potential converts are preferable: publicists uploading stills on their clients’ behalf won’t cut it. Weverse is also a good fit for acts whose followers have come up with “their own fandom name,” like Taylor Swift’s devoted Swifties. Musicians who work with the app receive tips on how to deploy “authenticity” to convert mere listeners into something more. As Choi once put it, “The thing we’re really digging into is the psychological mechanism of falling in love.”

Western executives have been seduced, too. HYBE’s deal with Universal, the world’s largest music company, came after the smash hits “Butter” and “Dynamite,” BTS’s first English-language singles. “It was kind of a religious thing,” Bang recalled, laughing. “They just believed in me without any doubt.”

When developing Katseye, hybe and Universal studied previous “idol bands” that had succeeded in America. “I was pretty sure the Spice Girls should be our role model,” Bang told me. He spent hours explaining to Grainge and Janick, the Interscope head, the art of “engineering” a K-pop band. Executives reviewed audition tapes and trawled TikTok and Instagram for candidates, then flew the most promising to L.A. for more than a year of rigorous training. Once twenty finalists had been chosen, fans entered the picture. “X-Factor”-style survival shows have become a K-pop staple, giving viewers a greater sense of loyalty to—and ownership of—the artists who emerge victorious.

For Katseye, voting took place on Weverse. After each “mission”—say, updating a Spice Girls tune with K-pop choreography—users voted for their favorite contestants. Some preferences aligned with executives’ expectations: Sophia Laforteza, a twenty-one-year-old from the Philippines with killer vocals, got huge support. A more surprising victor was Manon Bannerman, a twenty-two-year-old Ghanaian Swiss who had raw charisma but little experience as a singer or a dancer. “To be perfectly candid, I don’t like fan voting, because I think there are some areas where that kind of collective intellect works, and areas where it doesn’t work,” Bang told me. “But sometimes good promotion is as important as good content.” To reach a yet larger audience, hybe and Geffen Records devised “Pop Star Academy,” a Netflix docuseries charting the competition phase, which began streaming soon after Katseye’s début was released.

The executives honed the members' images obsessively: one early concern was that Laforteza—all sweetness and diligence—was *too* K-pop to appeal to Americans, who expected something edgier. Humberto Leon, Katseye's creative director, even reviewed the captions of the girls' social-media posts. "Everything that has their voice, I'm a part of it," he said. While they trained, he constantly assessed what he called their "believability." Could they really sell a gut-wrenching ballad or a joyful club track? They were also coached on facial expressions—like how to pull off a sly wink in the middle of a dance move. Katseye's members, Leon said, needed "a certain amount of confidence, but also a certain amount of vulnerability. Part of being a pop star is the ability to transform."

One afternoon this spring, Katseye assembled at a dance studio in North Hollywood for a promotional ritual depressingly referred to as a "social-content day." The survival-show phase had left the group with a modest following; now, like BTS had, Katseye was trying to build hype before its all-important début. I arrived to find the girls teasing one another as they practiced lines that they'd just been given for a new video. They'd spent the weekend moving into a house that they'd share in L.A., and their friendship seemed real, even if label employees were determined to cannibalize it: a genuine moment in which the English phrase "crack open a book" was explained to Yoonchae Jeong, the group's only Korean member, was swiftly restaged for a "behind the scenes" clip.

The girls gathered for a photo shoot. Shouted prompts cycled them through poses: "Cool!" was poised and unsmiling; "Cute!" prompted a flurry of kisses and peace signs. Despite their different backgrounds, they looked strangely alike: all had the same willowy build and practiced gestures. Laforteza slipped away to rehearse. "I have the most lines!" she said, fretfully, before reciting them: "Today is a huge day because—guess what? We finally got our official fandom name!"

While the announcement was being filmed, staffers crowded around the girls, brandishing four cameras and two phones; a laptop served as a makeshift teleprompter. In unison, the girls declared that their fans, in a rather tenuous pun, would be known as Eyekons. (One wonders what they would've been called had the company chosen another name for the band from its shortlist: NewCrazy.) "Going with 'K,' just like in Katseye—it just really highlights the close bond we have with you all," one girl said. A handler corrected her: "The bond *between us and all of you*." The script emphasized that the word "Eyekons" had come "directly" from fans. Later, a hybe employee told me that she routinely monitored Weverse for hashtags and slogans that the company could appropriate.

Some hybe artists, including BTS, play an active role in their own promotional strategies, to insure that "their actual personalities" shine through. "People can't really fake their friendships in most contexts," the employee said. Superfans analyze body language to identify tensions among members: "K-pop fans *always* notice—and they usually guess correctly."

hybe has figured out how to stoke genuine camaraderie through artificial means. The artists take trips together, which help members bond while generating valuable "getaway content." The Katseye girls had flown to Seoul during the survival-show phase and documented excursions to theme parks and convenience stores. After the competition, their handlers deployed tactics from other hybe groups to build a fan base. Suga, a BTS member, had shared his musical tastes in online d.j. sessions; Katseye unveiled Katseye Radio, to showcase the girls' favorite tracks. A group called Tomorrow x Together had written letters to fans; Katseye did the same. Every month, the girls were given letterhead and a theme, along with some basic parameters ("think about memories from when you were young," "don't specify

too much personal information"). Initially, some members mentioned family members by name, but these details were later scrubbed, to deflect stalking.

At the end of Katseye's day at the studio, the band had to film a dance cover of a track from another nascent hybe girl group, Illit. The clip would promote Illit and Katseye simultaneously. As the girls rehearsed, I was struck by both their skill and the emptiness of what they were being asked to do with it. The video for Illit's new song, "Magnetic," had just been released, and Katseye had had to memorize the choreography over the weekend, by scrutinizing an early cut whose digital watermarks had obscured Illit's hand motions. Laforteza had stayed up until 4 a.m. to perfect her moves after the official video dropped. She told me this cheerfully, adding, "That's the job!"

As artists within K-pop and beyond have discovered, fans' obsessive love can tip quickly into entitlement. Taylor Swift, who once wrote directly to followers on Tumblr, making them feel like friends, has increasingly faced mutinies. Last year, she dumped Matty Healy, the 1975's front man, amid a Swiftie-led pressure campaign. (An open letter accused him of "engaging in racist remarks," "making offensive jokes," and "watching degrading pornography.") But her subsequent album was laced with disdain for both Healy and the outsiders who presumed to guide her love life. One review was headlined "Taylor Swift Really Hates Matty Healy, and Also Maybe Us."

K-pop artists rarely lash out at their fans. Suk-Young Kim, a professor at U.C.L.A., believes that the dynamic goes beyond the conventional parasocial relationship between celebrity and civilian: K-pop stars, she writes in her book about the genre, are required to cultivate the sense of a "two-way love affair." (It helps that most idols, including the members of BTS, do not openly date.) Kim told me that the artists are trained to see themselves as "public property," adding that they are "on social media 24/7, living under the surveillance of cameras that are constantly following them." Last year, Jung Kook fell asleep for twenty minutes on Weverse Live—while more than six million people watched.

This kind of self-exposure isn't unique to K-pop. In 2011, *Billboard* introduced an annual Top Social Artist award, confirming that online followings had become as important as record sales. Bieber, who got his start on YouTube, received the award for the first six years; BTS won it for the next five. The group's victories are partly attributable to its army—the international fandom that promotes BTS on social media, translates its content into more than a dozen languages, and raises millions of dollars for causes that reflect the group's values. army, Kim told me, is "a labor of love—and it is *intense* labor."

Even when an act has devoted fans, longevity is far from assured. Kim said, of the K-pop machine, "There's no other music industry in the world targeting young people that systematically pushes out this volume of music. Nearly every day, there's some teaser or music video or album coming out." Because of the intensity of the competition, Kim noted, "the career of an idol tends to be very short."

Bang has taken bold steps to prolong BTS's life span. RM, the leader, has said that hybe "always told us about how important it is to make a world, like Star Wars or Marvel." BTS's music videos, Bang decided, should be designed to deepen viewer immersion. He told me, "We thought, Instead of just having a plot for the music video itself, why not have some lore behind it? Wouldn't that make it easier for fans to dive deep?" The experiment started in 2015 with the single "I Need U." The accompanying music video was rife with allusions to a larger narrative. The tone was sombre, and the scenes cinematic in nature, with no bright colors or elaborate choreography. Images had dark subtext: one boy reached numbly for pills behind a bathroom mirror; another stared down at his own bloodied hands. It was the first entry in the

so-called Bangtan Universe, in which alternate versions of the seven members are trapped in a cycle of tragedy, and struggle to break free.

This fantastical scenario energized a passionate subset of fans. As Bang had hoped, they generated countless artistic tributes and traded theories about the meaning of each installment. With BTS, hybe has it both ways: the boys themselves are relatable; their fictionalized selves are franchisable. The Bangtan Universe now spans twenty-seven official videos, and has been augmented by books, Web toons, and a video game. “Before, we just thought we were idols,” Jin, the group’s oldest member, has said. Now “it feels kind of like we’re playing the lead roles in a movie.”

Weverse Con Festival, a two-day affair, is an annual showcase of hybe’s power. This June, it was in Incheon. Eighteen thousand fans paid as much as sixty-six dollars each to watch a live stream, and when I logged in, early on a Sunday morning, users were comparing time zones as if they were battle scars. A woman named Jen, who’d stayed up all night to see her favorite group, confessed, “I am going to work with no sleep, and I work with machinery.”

In Incheon, K-pop luminaries were performing before an audience of twenty-two thousand. J. Y. Park, Bang’s ex-producing partner and a former idol himself, was about to begin a set, with the tantalizing promise of “special guests.” A platform rose to reveal Bang himself soulfully strumming an acoustic guitar. Park wore a tight purple top and shiny silver trousers; Bang looked staid in black as he head-banged to the beat.

Decades after he had relinquished his teen-age dream, Bang was finally playing to a packed arena. But the crowd went wild only once he’d left the stage—when the members of the boy band Enhypen emerged from the floor in shredded clothes, as if coming out of their graves. Fake cobwebs and gothic arches formed a backdrop as the boys moved in perfect unison—a horde of improbably elegant zombies. “Vampire lords!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” someone enthused on Weverse.

Bang hit on Enhypen’s undead look when watching the boys as trainees. “There’s something really dark and sexy about them,” he said. Back then, they were “not part of the general public, but not celebrities yet. Being of two worlds, but not belonging to either, made me think of vampires.”

When Enhypen was formed, in 2020, a gothic aesthetic known as Dark Academia was dominating TikTok. Bang had tapped into the trend. hybe now has an entire “story division” that supplies acts with fictional narratives for promotional content; Enhypen’s vampire personae have appeared in a “Twilight”-like Web novel and on an EP called “Dark Blood.” (One track is titled “Bite Me.”) Bang told me, “The fan reaction was, I think, a big milestone for us. They didn’t say, ‘This is another way hybe is making money, by utilizing *our* Enhypen.’ They enjoyed it as its own content.”

Bang noted that “it’s important for the artists to *like* the story,” adding, “If the artists think about it as business and nothing else, we’ve seen that that lowers the chance of success for the endeavor.”

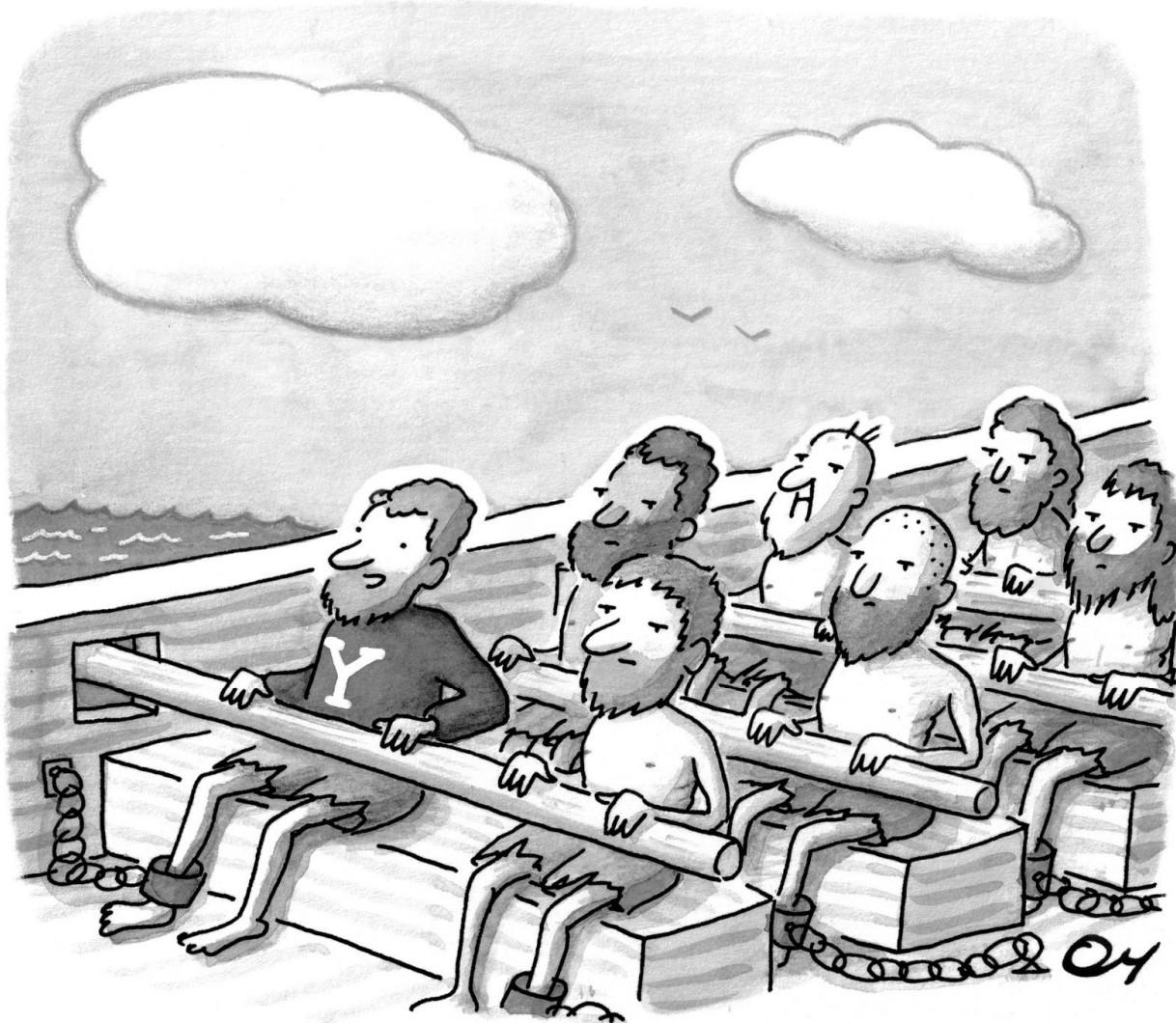
“The first thing we’re going to talk about is hair changes,” Humberto Leon, Katseye’s creative director, said, displaying a series of photographs of the girls on a screen. Executives had gathered in John Janick’s office at Interscope Geffen, down the road from hybe America, to review plans for the group’s début. Leon and Bang (Zoom handle: hitman) were attending remotely.

The most dramatic makeover was that of Daniela Avanzini, a twenty-year-old Cuban Venezuelan American, whose black ringlets had been dyed honey-blond. Leon explained, “It gives her Latin flavor—if we think of Shakira, I think this gives her that vibe.” Janick, wearing a baseball cap and perched in an Eames chair, said, “Good!”

Leon clicked on a slide labelled “odd eye explore,” and hesitated. “This is something Bang had talked to us about—‘odd eye’ is a Korean term that refers to people with two different-colored eyes,” he said. Onscreen, one of the Indian American member Lara Raj’s eyes, which are brown, had been turned ice blue. Carefully, Leon said, “I think it could look . . . a little alien-like?” Another skeptical executive deemed the vibe “James Bond villain.”

Bang is normally inquisitive in meetings (“What is the hero’s story?,” “What makes a fan love Yoonchae?”), but today he seemed preoccupied. Someone gently said, “Bang, this is an idea that you suggested.”

“I’ll give it some thought,” he said, vaguely. (Raj’s eyes remain brown.)



“Wow, the current is strong today. It reminds me of the championship race back when I was at Yale. Did I mention I rowed at Yale?”

Cartoon by Dan Misdea

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The group began discussing a treatment for Katseye’s first music video, outlining such themes as “overcoming fear and dreaming big” and “having fun with just the girls.” Bang suddenly interjected, “I’m really, really sorry—but I need to make an urgent phone call.”

An insurrection had broken out within hybe. Bang had come to believe that Min Hee-jin—the head of a sub-label responsible for the wildly popular girl group NewJeans—was trying to leave hybe and take the band with her. Earlier that day, Min had held a two-hour press conference in which she disputed the charge—and shared a text from Bang himself asking her to “crush” a rival act. The event had aired on all three major Korean broadcasters and been live-streamed on YouTube. The NewJeans uproar would soon cause the company’s stock to plunge by hundreds of millions of dollars. hybe had been the first K-pop company big enough to implement a multi-label system; now the hydra that Bang had fed for a decade was threatening to eat itself.

Though the conflict underlined the perils of overextending one’s empire, Bang was forging ahead. A few weeks later, he told me, “Music delivers a very strong experience and emotions in an instant of listening. But we want to make it so that it can be part of a much longer and more sustained type of content consumption.” He continued, “I’ve read books about gamification and why people are addicted to games.” He was studying multiplayer online role-playing games and first-person shooters, and planned to develop games across multiple genres; some would feature alter egos of hybe artists, but others would have no connection with the idols. This turn felt at once arbitrary and revealing: increasingly, the company seemed to be losing interest in the musicians themselves.

Indeed, hybe has been quietly testing out VTubers—animated characters rendered via motion capture of human actors. In Japan, where the practice originated, these avatars bring in millions of dollars a month live-streaming and “performing” in concerts. Bang told me that hybe’s VTube projects don’t use the company’s name, adding that they are an experiment “to identify what it is that people find attractive in digital characters.” hybe has acquired Supertone, an A.I.-audio startup, and he anticipates débütting digital singers soon: “The expandability of nonhuman artists is unlimited.”

Not for the first time, I wondered if Bang’s mania for optimization had gone too far. hybe’s goal, it seems, is simply to get bigger—embracing whatever medium, language, or technology maximizes its reach. Choi, the Weverse executive, felt that the app was an extension of his boss’s “love of music.” Bang, he insisted, “wants to be in the music business forever—but he felt that the entire industry situation was very hard.” Although Bang’s fixation on audience data had kept his artists afloat, the emphasis on constant growth has changed the company culture. “We’re expanding like a U.S. business—we’re

expanding catalogues, we're expanding our labels," Bang told me. "I don't know if we can even call this K-pop anymore, what this will become."

When Katseye's début single—titled "Debut"—was released, in June, it met with a tepid response. The attempt to showcase all six girls in a two-minute track felt rushed; the lyrics, co-written by Ryan Tedder (who also worked on "Halo," for Beyoncé), were awkward: "Love me once the naughty turns to nice." But, by midsummer, Bang's playbook was working. The far catchier second single, "Touch," came complete with TikTok-friendly choreography, and soon became lodged on Spotify's Top Hits playlist. When a video dense with blink-and-you'll-miss-it hints at a larger universe was released, fan theories bloomed in response.

The EP's third track, co-produced by Bang, is particularly revealing of his method. If "Touch" is a bouncy earworm about waiting for a boy to text you back—a near-universal experience for Katseye's target demographic—"My Way" weaves in the girls' personal preoccupations. New hybe artists undergo extensive interviews that dig into their personal lives, convictions, and anxieties. For Katseye, Bang had deputized an executive to ask them about "how the world sees them, and how they were able to let these things go." Bang reviewed the transcripts and channelled the answers into "My Way," which is about brushing off haters. "Every line, I try to put in stories from the lives of the members," he told me. Avanzini sings of youthful insecurity about her thick, curly hair; during a live stream celebrating the album, listeners latched on to the verse: "i can relate to you dani," one wrote, adding, "i have super curly coily hair and i struggled for a long time to love it."

In July, I attended Katseye's first live performance, which took place in L.A., on the final day of KCON, an annual proving ground for K-pop acts. The Enhypen booth, at the Los Angeles Convention Center, featured exclusive versions of the group's latest album, "Romance: Untold," which could be purchased only via Weverse. I thought that the added fuss of scanning a QR code and downloading an app might hurt sales, but attendees whipped out their phones, and the limited editions quickly sold out. (That weekend, "Romance: Untold" hit No. 2 on the *Billboard* 200.)

A few hours before the show, I noticed a crowd dotted with black-and-purple signs that read "welcome to katseye world" converging around a booth devoted to KCON's lead sponsor, Samsung Galaxy. The girls, dressed in red and black, were doing some sponcon. A man with a microphone celebrated the way the Galaxy enabled users to take "hands-free" selfies, and asked the girls to demonstrate. They struck their "Cute!" pose. A boy near me, in a pastel-blue sweater, shouted for the members by name: "Manon! Yoonchae! Sophia!" His eyes brimmed with tears.

The boy, a nineteen-year-old from Alabama named Joshua, had flown to L.A. with eight friends for KCON. He'd followed Katseye since the competition phase, downloading Weverse to vote for his favorites—and had supported all six of the final members. A Black dancer himself, he found Manon's selection moving. "To see people of my same background break out onto the scene, and to get to watch her journey and her growth, is really inspiring," he told me. "What's special about Katseye is that they feel so down to earth—like normal people."

I headed to the nearby Crypto.com Arena to see an array of idols perform. Katseye, as a new group, was part of the pre-show. It was only 4:45 p.m. when the girls went onstage, and the arena was far from filled. But true believers screamed loudly enough to compensate. Giant screens displayed an introductory clip for each idol; Laforteza's prompted a roar.

Bang's training regime was paying off. The members' chemistry had visibly increased since I'd met them; their choreography was immaculate, down to their fine-tuned facial expressions. After the group sang "Debut," each girl addressed the crowd, telegraphing gratitude and excitement. Later, when clips of the performance were uploaded, Eyekons responded with proprietary pride at how far the group had come.

When I spoke to Bang again, in September, he, too, was pleased with Katseye's progress. They'd performed on "Good Morning America," and, though not everything was to his satisfaction—"I knew American music shows wouldn't be able to create the sort of stage that meets my expectations"—the girls had delivered. They have already amassed some ten million monthly listeners. Katseye would soon begin a tour of South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. "We're moving in step with the grand plan," Bang said. There'd been "whispers" among his American peers about "whether this would work here," he said, a bit smugly. "We can see with the numbers that it *is*."

His situation in Korea was less stable. Min Hee-jin had been forced out, but the HYBE idols who'd been under her care wanted her back—and had used the company's own tools to express displeasure. "After our C.E.O. was dismissed, I've been struggling and dealing with a lot of worries," a NewJeans member wrote to fans. "But there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think of you all and how *you* must be feeling." In mid-September, NewJeans stealthily held a live stream in which they demanded Min's reinstatement, and called out their boss directly: "We hope Chairman Bang and hybe will make a wise decision."

When I asked Bang about Min, he declined to comment, citing the ongoing legal conflict. He had other corners of the empire on his mind. hybe has opened offices in Mexico City and Miami, in an attempt to enter the Latin-music market. The company is quietly training a group in the region. "It's running well," Bang said. He's also developing two new groups in the U.S.—a boy band and another girl group—and was back in L.A. to work on a track with the rapper Don Toliver. "My ambition is not to just have *one* successful group," Bang said. "To achieve the ultimate goal of cultural change, it's almost a necessity to make sure you have many of them progressing."

Though he still speaks of BTS with paternal fondness, Bang takes a more hands-off approach with hybe's fledglings. When he called to congratulate BTS on topping the *Billboard* charts for the first time, in 2021—a moment immortalized in one of the behind-the-scenes videos that had helped to make the boys famous—he was near tears. These days, things are different. Even Enhypen, one of hybe's great hopes, has been subjected to a punishing, data-driven campaign: this summer, when the band concluded one world tour and immediately announced another, devotees parked a truck in front of the company's Seoul HQ emblazoned with the words "let enhypen rest." The group has sold millions of albums in the past few months alone—but few outside the world of K-pop have heard of them. Bang himself almost never watches them in the flesh. In deference to his digital-native audience, he now makes it his policy to experience hybe artists through a screen. Concerts like Weverse Con aside, he told me, "I haven't seen a live performance in person in a very long time."

Bang noted that it had been easier to train Katseye than early hybe acts, because the girls had already internalized much of his playbook. "Young artists from one generation ago, when we talked about K-pop-style fan engagement, a lot of them weren't comfortable with doing it," he said. But Katseye's members were "eager and active—even more, sometimes, than K-pop artists."

A week later, on the Philippines leg of Katseye's Asia tour, Laforteza started a Weverse Live. The stream had the air of a casual FaceTime with a friend; it was late in Manila, and she was brushing her hair as viewers poured in. She said she was thrilled to be back home, but confessed that, after several years in L.A., she'd grown rusty at using her mother tongue. "Can you guys help me . . . get back into the groove of speaking Tagalog?" she asked, in English. She switched playfully between the two languages, thanking Filipino users by name as they supplied words she'd forgotten.

Other Katseye members wandered into the room; Laforteza offered them Philippine snacks. They'd been bantering for half an hour when a follower dropped a Tagalog tongue twister in the chat. Laforteza managed it, but the other girls giggled as they stumbled over the words; it was the kind of easy, authentic cross-cultural communion that Bang had dreamed of. After several attempts, nobody had quite mastered the sentence, but one had a suggestion for how to make it stick: "If you teach me it like a song, I will understand." ♦

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